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DCI BRIEFING FOR SENATOR RUSSELL

19 May 1964

LAOS

- I. Pathet Lao forces, exploiting the dissension and confusion following the 19 April coup in Vientiane, have moved suddenly to overrun neutralist positions on the Plaine des Jarres. They were reportedly supported by North Vietnamese troops.
 - A. The Pathet Lao launched their offensive on 16 May, and in two days pushed Kong Le's battalions to the western fringes of the Plaine.
 - B. The defection of a key neutralist parabattalion eased things for the Pathet Lao.
 - C. The offensive was timed with a rightist pull out of a large troop concentration which had been stationed on the Plaine since Pathet Lao aggression last spring.
- II. The offensive may be intended to serve several purposes.
 - A. The Communists probably view the Plaine des Jarres as the key to control of north central Laos. As a road hub, it can be used as a staging area for further military initiatives.

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- B. By the same token, control over the Plaine will deny the neutralists the opportunity to invite right-wing support, as occurred last spring.
- C. In the immediate political context, the Pathet Lao probably hope this demonstration of power will serve them at any future bargaining sessions with the non-Communists.
- D. Although prepared well in advance, the attacks may have been set off by Premier Souvanna's determination--in the face of repeated Pathet Lao warnings--to reshuffle the cabinet.

III. The Pathet Lao drive on the Plaine was preceded by a major move against rightist regular and guerrilla forces operating in the mountains to the east.

- A. They have pushed three rightist battalions east of the Plaine away from Route 7, south to Tha Thom. On May 14 they attacked Tha Thom itself.
- B. The Communists are trying to dislodge Meo guerrilla units from key mountain positions east of the Plaine. For the past few years, the Meos have been highly effective in harassing and interdicting Pathet Lao movement on

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Route 7, the key supply artery from North Vietnam to the Plaine.

IV. We estimate that the Pathet Lao have 19,500 troops, supported by five to seven thousand North Vietnamese. (DIA estimates 9,100 Viet Minh.) The Pathet Lao alone would have at best a 50-50 chance of defeating the non-Communist forces. With Viet Minh support, however, they could overrun the entire country with little or no advance notice.

A. The Pathet Lao have better leadership and esprit de corps than the government forces.

The Communists are short on personnel, armor, and heavy weapons, however, and are almost totally dependent on North Vietnam for logistics.

B. The Viet Minh units in Laos are well equipped, well led, and well trained. Lao troops have an almost superstitious fear of them.

V. Premier Souvanna, who was arrested in the course of the April 19 coup, ostensibly has been returned to authority. Major decisions, however, apparently are made by the rightist leaders.

A. Apparently in a last-ditch effort to salvage the coalition, Souvanna has announced the

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"merger" of the rightist and neutralist forces under a command structure heavily loaded in favor of the rightists. He has called for the Pathet Lao to join and support this effort for unification.

- B. The Pathet Lao have refused. They claim "unification" is merely a rightist stratagem and that Souvanna is really a captive. They insist that any "merger" be made under the terms of a 1962 agreement whereby each aide would have the same number of troops in the unified national army.

VI. Our present judgment is that the Communists would prefer to maintain the three-way coalition framework of government while they consolidate control of the infiltration routes from North to South Vietnam. It seems unlikely that they plan to risk a major military escalation.

- A. If the rightists prevail in Vientiane, the Pathet Lao might set up their own "neutralist" regime, and intensify military operations. They would probably, however, try to keep the fighting below the level they calculate might provoke US intervention.

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